

The ESTATE PROJECT FOR ARTISTS WITH AIDS

Patrick Moore DIRECTOR

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THE ESTATE PROJECT FOR ARTISTS WITH AIDS LAUNCHES MAJOR FILM PRESERVATION INITIATIVE

"Friendly Witnesses: The Worlds of Warren Sonbert"
Opens at the Guggenheim Museum on April 21, 1999

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New York (March 5, 1999) — The films of Warren Sonbert, one of the seminal figures in American independent film, have been restored through a preservation initiative by **The Estate Project for Artists with AIDS** (a project of the Alliance for the Arts). Many of these films will be presented at the **Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum** in a film series entitled *Friendly Witnesses: The Worlds of Warren Sonbert* which runs from April 21 through May 8, 1999. The series will feature newly restored films, some of which had previously been considered lost, including *The Tenth Legion* (1986) and *The Tuxedo Theatre* (1968), as well as Sonbert's last film, *Whiplash*, which was completed by The Estate Project after his death in 1995 in time to be shown at the New York Film Festival in 1997.

Friendly Witnesses: The Worlds of Warren Sonbert is the result of an initiative by The Estate Project to restore and preserve the works of independent filmmakers who have been lost to AIDS or are living with HIV. The Estate Project—established in 1991 by the Alliance for the Arts in response to devastating effect of the AIDS crisis on the arts community—has created a pilot project to address the specific preservation issues concerning independent filmmakers. The Sonbert project will mark the completion of the first stage of The Estate Project's independent film preservation initiative.

The work of experimental filmmakers often exists in a highly fragile state. Historically, economic constraints have meant that these filmmakers lacked sufficient funds to make exhibition prints and have often been forced to project their fragile originals. Further, these films are often inadequately stored and information about their creation poorly documented. According to Patrick Moore, Director of The Estate Project for Artists with AIDS, this situation is only further complicated by HIV or AIDS.

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"Our aim was not only to restore Warren's films, but to look at the specific needs of preserving work by independent filmmakers. The Sonbert project has provided us, and the entire independent film community, with a blueprint for preserving the work of filmmakers outside the mainstream. These films are not only aesthetic accomplishments, they are valuable artifacts of a time and viewpoint in danger of being lost to AIDS."

Jon Gartenberg, who is guest curator of *Friendly Witnesses: The Worlds of Warren Sonbert*, spearheads The Estate Project's independent film preservation initiative. In the case of Sonbert, Gartenberg has worked with the Academy Film Archive to preserve Sonbert's entire body of work from camera originals and original prints. The Estate Project also funded the completion of *Whiplash*, overseen by Gartenberg and finished by filmmaker Jeff Scher, who was asked by Sonbert to complete his film according his specific instructions. Assistance was also provided by Sonbert's companion Ascension Serrano, the owner of Sonbert's estate, who worked closely with Sonbert prior to his death and has played an instrumental role in ensuring his work is preserved.

Extensive research was also conducted in order to create complete filmographies and catalogues of Sonbert's work, including the discovery and examination of his outtake reels (the raw material which he used to create his completed films). This material has provided fresh insight into Sonbert's creative process.

"We have approached Warren's creative evolution as one might a painter, poet or musician," said Jon Gartenberg. "The project has been ambitious and incredibly complex to perform, but it has been very rewarding since it has brought us to a greater understanding of Warren's artistic imprint on each of his films, of his observations about the world at large, and of his intense interaction with not only commercial and Hollywood films and filmmakers, but also the worlds of music, opera, poetry and art."

Sonbert first started making films as a student at New York University in 1966. His first films, which were shown at the Film-Makers' Cinematheque and Bleeker Street Cinema in New York, received wide critical acclaim among the press, including *The Village Voice*, *The Independent Film Journal* and *Variety*.

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Sonbert soon established what became his unique, personal form of filmmaking. In the late 1960s, when he started to travel, Sonbert took his Bolex camera with him, incorporating newly shot footage from his international travels together with footage from his earlier films. He often made personal appearances at screenings of his work, which were soon being shown at film festivals and leading cultural institutions in the United States and Europe, including New York, San Francisco, Toronto, London, Berlin, Rotterdam and Auckland.

Sonbert has been honored by numerous retrospectives and exhibitions, including six Cineprobes at the Museum of Modern Art and six Biennials at the Whitney Museum of American Art. In 1987, he received a Special Jury Award for Experimental Film at the San Francisco Film Festival. Sonbert was also a prolific writer, including reviews of international opera, music and mainstream cinema, and a screenplay adaptation of Richard Strauss' *Opera Capriccio*. He also had an active relationship with the New York art world and a dialogue with Bay Area poets.

Friendly Witnesses: The Worlds of Warren Sonbert is guest curated by Jon Gartenberg and organized by John G. Hanhardt, Senior Curator of Film and Media Arts, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and Assistant Curator Maria-Christina Villaseñor. In the program, Sonbert's films have been placed alongside other films by Stan Brakhage, Abigail Child, Nathaniel Dorksky, Alfred Hitchcock, Gerard Malanga, Gregory Markopoulos, Jeff Scher and Andy Warhol, revealing the multiple influences and interaction between Sonbert and his contemporaries in both the independent and commercial film industries.

The Estate Project's Independent Film Preservation Program is a cooperative effort with the Academy Film Archive and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. The program, and in particular the Sonbert project, is made possible through the generous support of the Robert D. Farber Fund and the Rockefeller Foundation.

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Film stills and portraits of Warren Sonbert are available on request.

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